



UAC

Australian Universities Accord

Response to the Interim Report

August 2023

UAC acknowledges and pays respect to the past, present and future traditional custodians and elders of this nation. We honour the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

About UAC

The Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT) Pty Ltd (UAC) was established in 1995 and is the largest tertiary admissions centre in Australia. Owned by universities in NSW and the ACT, our mission is to provide excellence in admissions services and promote equity of access to tertiary education. Central to that mission is a strong culture of servicing the needs of all our stakeholders, in particular our institutions and applicants.

UAC has a trusted and valuable position in the higher education sector. Applicants, in particular Year 12 students, turn to UAC for unbiased and authoritative information about university admissions and courses and for an easy interface with which to apply. Institutions rely upon UAC services to handle the bulk of the admissions process, allowing them to focus on their core capabilities of learning and teaching, research, and community engagement. Parents, schools, the media, and the public know UAC as their first point of reference for university admissions in NSW and the ACT.

In recent years UAC has developed a credit management system and a suite of products and services using verifiable credentials and distributed ledger technologies. We have been very proud to work with the Australian Government to establish the Course Seeker website, the National Credentials Platform pilot and the microcredentials marketplace MicroCred Seeker.

As a not-for-profit working in the broad interests of the education sector, UAC is well-placed to provide objective and neutral advice to government, the sector and beyond.

UAC is therefore pleased to provide the following response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report.

Executive summary

UAC's three most significant reflections on the Interim Report are:

1. The opportunities that would be afforded people and Australia by the establishment of a national skills passport to build on the development of the National Credentials Platform. This is a welcome inclusion in the Interim Report and will provide a platform for a wider array of learner attributes including general capabilities.
2. The acknowledgement of the need for better standards for credit recognition, and development of stackable skills pathways to allow for the inclusion of microcredentials and a more seamless integration of VET and higher education.
3. Recognition of the importance of helping students understand and navigate pathways in the context of an expanding tertiary education system. This is imperative in the context of widening participation from equity groups. The role of AI tools and consistent data standards in this context is not included in the Interim Report but cannot be overlooked.

UAC agrees with the following aim identified as worthy of further consideration in the Interim Report:

1. a consistent national approach to tertiary education admission.

Our response on these areas appears in the following section.

UAC has no specific areas of disagreement but would like the Panel to thoroughly consider how best to “sell” universities to the wider community. All Australians should have a deep understanding of the value of our universities, what they do and what they can do for Australia.

UAC makes no specific recommendation regarding measures of success; only that a full suite of measures needs to include quantitative and qualitative data from the broader set of all stakeholders in university education, including prospective students and schools.

UAC response

National skills passport (page 55 of the Interim Report)

As noted in our submission to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper, verifiable credentials technology platforms and digital learner profiles can provide learners, education institutions and employers with the necessary tools for lifelong learning and employability by incorporating a wide range of personal attributes including general capabilities.

A national skills passport is a logical extension of the collaborative work done on the National Credentials Platform (NCP) and credentials projects in NSW and other states. National collaborations extend into the development of general capabilities assessment, an important foundational piece for a holistic representation of skills.

This will assist in sustaining a unified tertiary sector because:

- credentials are the currency that enables the important pieces of the national education, skills and employment infrastructure (such as the school system, the tertiary sector, the AQF and the ASC) to work together
- a digital passport is the optimal vehicle for those credentials – and choosing the right approach and the latest credentials technology will allow students to have agency over what they choose to share with whom. Imagine how beneficial a free wallet for tertiary students would be in helping Australia to fulfil its productivity, innovation and employment goals
- the development of nationally consistent data standards (as has been achieved with the national microcredentials marketplace MicroCred Seeker) would make this both achievable and cost-effective.

Credit recognition and microcredentials (pages 50 and 53 of the Interim Report)

As noted in our submission to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper, transparent and consistent credit recognition between VET and higher education will significantly increase student mobility, as will increased recognition of microcredentials.

The establishment of MicroCred Seeker demonstrated that national standards that ensure interoperability, comparability and optimisation of student choice and mobility can be achieved in a cost-effective way. These concepts can easily be extended to credit recognition.

If credentials constitute the currency that can be exchanged for admission to further study, entry to the employment market, or indeed career progression, then credit recognition is the critical mechanism by which those credentials are recognised. Credit and credentialing go hand in hand.

Ideas around credit and credentialing also align well with the pursuit of a national skills passport. If it utilises the latest credentials technology, this single digital platform will allow individuals to readily store, own, share and prove a broad range of credentials to access, transfer and receive credit for study and to seek employment and other opportunities.

Helping students understand and navigate pathways (page 56 of the Interim Report)

As noted in our submission to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper, pathway or foundation programs are a highly effective start to higher education for many students and more work is needed to better communicate to learners the complex and extensive array of entry and transfer points into and within tertiary education. This is especially true for under-represented groups whose awareness of and access to pathways may be compromised by lack of financial and other resources.

The Accord Panel could also consider how technology and artificial intelligence (AI) tools can be harnessed to present tailored pathways information. UAC has developed a range of such tools for people seeking to find a path from school through to further study. They enable students to explore options for study from middle secondary school through to senior secondary school and then to university. Much more could be done with modest investment into further development of fit-for-purpose infrastructure such as standards. Consistent national data standards would provide the necessary foundation for interoperability and mobility across the tertiary sector.

Beyond linear entry points into education, technology can make tangible the journey from education to employment (and back to education). For individuals it is a means to clearly identify a desired, achievable pathway. For institutions it is a means by which to better facilitate entry into and study of subjects that are in demand. For government it is a tool to promote those pathways that best align with national priorities.

Consistent national approach to tertiary education admission (page 68 of Interim Report)

A National Tertiary Admissions System has been in place since 1995 and is administered by the Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admissions Centres (ACTAC), of which UAC is a member.

The features of the national system include common dates, interstate exchange of Year 12 results and university transcripts, interstate eligibility and equivalences across states, and use of a common admission index for Australian Year 12 students – the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

These nationally consistent features sit alongside important state-based arrangements such as relationships with local secondary school sectors, state-based university groups, and state governments.

Areas for improvement could include nationally consistent approaches to:

- equity/special access schemes that seek to address the impacts of educational disadvantage
- early offers and other alternative pathway schemes for Year 12 students; and
- VET admission.

Further consideration of these areas may be warranted if it can be demonstrated that they would lead to tangible benefits to students and/or realisation of an Accord objective such as equity in participation, access, and opportunity.